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Erik Satie's Poetry

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## ERIK SATIE'S POETRY

'Sa place parmi les musiciens fut trop longtemps contestée. Lui accordera-t-on maintenant celle qu'il devrait occuper comme écrivain, comme poète?' This question was posed in 1952 by Jean Roy, in a special number of the *Revue musicale* in 1952 entitled *Erik Satie, son temps et ses amis*.<sup>1</sup> That special number set a precedent which Satie studies have followed ever since. It gave significant space to his writings, publishing several of them *in extenso*, including three tiny poems in regular verse entitled *Trois poèmes d'amour*; thus it clearly implied its belief in his status as a poet. Yet this belief gave rise to no critical analysis. Satie as poet was recognized by music-lovers and music journals; but he remained almost invisible to the literary critical establishment. And that situation has not changed.

In his monumental and definitive *Dada à Paris*, published in 2005, Michel Sanouillet describes Satie, at the time of his appearance on the Dada scene in the early 1920s, as 'un grand poète, déjà méconnu'.<sup>2</sup> In 1969, in one of the very few articles ever published on Satie in a literary journal, Sanouillet had written: 'De mieux en mieux connu des mélomanes et des musicologues, Erik Satie a pratiquement jusqu'à ce jour été boudé par la critique littéraire.'<sup>3</sup> A crude statistic demonstrates that Satie is still 'boudé par la critique littéraire' today: in March 2007, the MLA International Bibliography (which references modern languages, literatures, folklore, and linguistics) listed only 19 articles referring to Satie, as opposed, for example, to 31 each for Debussy and Ravel, and 111 for Berlioz. Comparison with the RILM database ('Répertoire international de littérature musicale', the nearest musicological equivalent to the MLA) is instructive: it contains about thirteen times as many Berlioz articles as the MLA, thirty-one times as many Debussy and Ravel articles, and twenty-eight times as many Satie articles. One may therefore conclude that relative to his musicological standing, Berlioz is by far the most popular of these composers among literary critics; there is no statistically significant difference between the literary standing of Satie and that of Debussy or Ravel. Over the last three decades, several splendid books on Satie's work have appeared, by Vincent Lajoinie, Alan Gillmor, Robert Orledge, and Steven Moore Whiting<sup>4</sup> among others, while Ornella Volta's exemplary publications have made Satie's non-musical writings readily available for the first time, and illuminated their context. However, none of this research has been done by literary critics; and this, as we shall see, has severely limited the analysis of his poetry. My aim in this essay is to attempt, for the first time, to examine Satie's poetry as poetry.

I should like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the Research Leave Award that allowed me to write this article; the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland for a grant to work in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France; and Ken Thomson and Jamie Dayan for technical support.

<sup>1</sup> 'Satie poète', *Revue musicale*, 214 (June 1952), 55–57 (p. 55).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris*, édition nouvelle, revue, remaniée et augmentée par Anne Sanouillet (Paris: CNRS, 2005), p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> 'Erik Satie et son "violon d'encre"', *Travaux de linguistique et de littérature*, 7 (1969), 167–80 (p. 167).

<sup>4</sup> Full references to these books will be found below.

That, of course, begs the question: what is poetry? In the years when Satie was writing (roughly, 1887–1924), that question was rendered problematic as never before or since, by a two-pronged assault. First: those years saw the apotheosis of the symbolist drive to blur the distinction between poetry and music. Thus when Poulenc, discussing the performance of Satie's piano music, writes: 'Ce qu'il faut pour rendre à cette musique son exquise poésie c'est: joindre à la plus scrupuleuse minutie; l'abandon de l'amour',<sup>5</sup> the word 'poésie' would normally be taken to indicate a property of music, rather than an art using words; though this normal acceptation is itself destabilized by the fact that Poulenc has been analysing piano pieces which, in Satie's inimitable style, are accompanied by poetic texts generally ignored in performance. Second: Satie was both a precursor of and a gleeful participant in the Dada movement; and the first principle of Dada is to scorn any academic definition of any art form. Furthermore, it is difficult to classify much of Satie's writing by any established literary historical standards simply because its genre remains unique. I am sure that the average musician or musicologist acquainted with Satie's work, if asked for an opinion about his poetry, would immediately think of the extraordinary texts inserted between the lines of the piano pieces he wrote between 1912 and 1917. These, as we shall see, certainly have many of the characteristics traditionally associated with poetry. However, they are not generally referred to as poems, doubtless because of the mode of their presentation. Poems are normally either published as texts to be seen on the page, or else heard, when read out or sung. The writings to which I refer were originally published not as independent texts, but with the piano music; yet they are not to be sung, nor are they to be read out.<sup>6</sup> A pianist will see them on the music, certainly, but almost incidentally, for he or she will not have procured the music in order to read them; an audience hearing the music will normally remain ignorant of the texts' very existence, and it is highly unlikely that anyone not interested in the music will ever see them. As Roger Shattuck and others have pointed out,<sup>7</sup> this means that the public for these texts seems destined to be restricted largely to pianists; and pianists are not normally recognized as a body competent to attribute the status of poetry to texts.

However, there is one text by Satie which is meant to be heard by an audience: that of those *Trois poèmes d'amour*, which he set to music in 1914, and performed and published in 1916.<sup>8</sup> The title is typical of Satie in the way it plays on and exaggerates the blurring of boundaries between music and poetry which I referred to above. French composers had for many years been publish-

<sup>5</sup> 'La musique de piano d'Erik Satie', *Revue musicale*, 214 (June 1952), 23–26 (p. 26).

<sup>6</sup> On this point, Satie was firm. As Poulenc, for example, puts it: 'il ne faut pas, sous peine d'excommunication majeure, Satie dixit, lire, avant ou pendant, les histoires et les indications bouffes dont il émaille sa musique' ('La musique de piano d'Erik Satie', p. 25).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Roger Shattuck, 'Erik Satie et la musique de placard', *Revue musicale*, 214 (June 1952), 47–54.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Orledge states that the first publication was in December 1914, in *La Gazette du bon ton*; see *Satie the Composer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 309. However, I do not think this first publication ever materialized. No number of the *Gazette du bon ton* dated December 1914 was ever published, and no trace of Satie's songs appears in the surrounding numbers. I am grateful to Monsieur Yann Onfroy, librarian at the Bibliothèque des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, for confirmation of this.

ing pieces of music with the word 'poème' in the title; but these were invariably instrumental pieces (such as Chausson's famous *Poème* of 1896 for violin and orchestra), unless the word referred to poems previously published as independent texts (as in Ravel's and Debussy's *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*). Satie was the first composer, to my knowledge, ever to publish a piece as a 'poème' with both words and music by the composer; with the result that one cannot tell whether the label 'poème' applies to the words (as it clearly does in the case of Ravel and Debussy), or to the music (as in Chausson's concerto), or both. Fortunately, one need not pause for long to worry about whether this means one can really take the texts as poems in their own right; for they have a formal characteristic, again unique in Satie's output, which clearly marks them as poetic: they are in regular verse. And even in 1914, any text written in regular verse, on the subject of love, set to music, and published and performed in a 'high art' context, would surely have been received as poetic, by any audience likely to have seen or heard these songs. In short, if poetry is defined as that which is taken to be poetry by the community that receives it, these texts are, more certainly than anything else Satie wrote, poems.

As Robert Orledge has shown, it seems clear that Satie's starting-point in writing these poems was a regular verse form, a metric scheme. A bewildering number of manuscript versions of these tiny works survive (and the published version is different from all of them).<sup>9</sup> From the first draft to the final text, two things remains unchanged: that metric scheme, which is the same in every one of the twenty-four lines and in every version of those lines; and the careful construction of a rhythm in the music designed to emphasize, as we shall see, one particular feature of that scheme. However, Satie's versification has been incorrectly analysed, technically speaking, by all the musicologists who have written about it, including Orledge himself; and no literary critic has, to date, taken an interest in it. It is, therefore, worth beginning from the prosodic beginning. And since the texts are so short, I shall quote them in full.<sup>10</sup>

## I

Ne suis que grain de sable,  
Toujours frais et t'aimable.  
Qui boit, qui rit, qui chante  
Pour plaire à son amante.  
Tout doux, ma chère belle  
Aimez votre amant frère:  
Il n'est que grain de sable,  
Toujours frais et t'aimable.

## 2

Suis chauve de naissance,  
Par pure bienséance

<sup>9</sup> Orledge calculates that Satie made 'at least 13 attempts at the final song'. See 'Satie's Approach to Composition in his Later Years', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 111 (1984-85), 156-79 (p. 159).

<sup>10</sup> The text I give here is that of the first edition, published by Rouart-Lerolle in Paris in 1916. It is faithfully reproduced in: Erik Satie, *Mémoires et chansons* (Paris: Salabert, 1988), pp. 20-21. The peculiarities of punctuation are certainly not mere mistakes; one can see their genesis in the manuscripts, and I shall argue that they often have a semantic function.

Je n'ai plus confiance  
 En ma jeune vaillance.  
 Pourquoi cette arrogance,  
 De la si belle Hortence?<sup>11</sup>  
 Très chauve de naissance,  
 Le suis par bienséance.

## 3

Ta parure est secrète,  
 Ô douce luronnette.  
 Ma belle guillerette  
 Fume la cigarette  
 Ferai-je sa conquête,  
 Que je voudrais complète?  
 Ta parure est secrète,  
 Ô douce luronnette.

According to all traditional canons of French verse analysis, these are indisputably six-syllable lines, with a feminine ending to every line. It has been a general convention in French verse since the Middle Ages that the shadowy syllable of the feminine ending is not counted when one adds up the number of syllables in the line for metrical purposes. Musicologists, however, have always said that Satie's lines contain seven syllables. Vincent Lajoinie, in *Erik Satie* (published in 1985, and doubtless the first book to propose a serious analysis of Satie's text-music relations), simply states that the *Trois poèmes d'amour* are in 'des vers de sept pieds'.<sup>12</sup> Alan Gillmor, in his *Erik Satie* of 1988, similarly maintains: 'In the three poems [. . .] Satie forced upon himself an unvarying metric scheme of seven syllable lines.'<sup>13</sup> Two years later, Orledge, in *Satie the Composer*, writes: 'the verse-form of the thirteenth-century *trouvères* is modified from the customary ten or eight syllable lines to seven' (p. 78). And Steven Moore Whiting, whose assessment of Satie's literary roots in *Satie the Bohemian* is the most careful to date, joins the musicological consensus: 'each bar syllabically sets a single seven-syllable poetic line to the same rhythmic pattern'.<sup>14</sup> In a way, this is understandable. Traditionally, in French art songs, the 'e muet' of the feminine line ending is set as a syllable; with the result that the line has one more syllable when set to music than it does when analysed prosodically. This is precisely the feature that Satie sets out to emphasize in his musical settings, 'poking fun at the vocalized mute "e" in sung French at the end of each line'.<sup>15</sup>

By the beginning of the twentieth century, it had become accepted as a fact, by Parisian poets and by prosodists, that the 'e muet' of the feminine rhyme was not pronounced, and had not been pronounced for centuries. (Actually,

<sup>11</sup> Could this be a misprint (reproduced in all editions) for 'Hortense'? Satie's manuscripts, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, have 'Hortense'; but in MS 20314, which is the closest to the published version, Satie's rather Gothic 's' looks very much like a 'c'. This is, of course, not conclusive.

<sup>12</sup> *Erik Satie* (Lausanne: Âge d'Homme, 1985), p. 306.

<sup>13</sup> *Erik Satie* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 184.

<sup>14</sup> *Satie the Bohemian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 419.

<sup>15</sup> Orledge, *Satie the Composer*, p. 77.

this is not the case; but that was the conventional wisdom of the time.<sup>16</sup>) To the literary mind, that 'e muet' could and should make no difference to the audible syllable count. It was a metrical feature for the eye alone, not for the ear. Its obstinate vocalization in the French art song was therefore an anomaly. It was a sound that no poet intended when writing verse; it was heard only as a supplement imposed on poetry by the alien genre of song.

Certainly, the 'e muet' did not have the same status in every kind of text, and its treatment in song varied correspondingly. Ravel's *Histoires naturelles* of 1907 are settings of prose texts, not of verse; Ravel here leaves the 'e muet' unpronounced. But he always respected the difference between prose and verse rhythms.<sup>17</sup> In verse, Satie and Ravel both systematically set the 'e muet' of the feminine line ending, even in comic vernacular songs. It is therefore hardly surprising to see that syllable given a separate note at the end of every line of the *Trois poèmes d'amour*. What is surprising, not to say disconcerting, is its prominence.

In every draft of the songs, as in the published version, the longest syllable in every one of the twenty-four lines is the 'e muet' of the feminine rhyme. In some of the earliest drafts, in what Orledge describes as waltz time,<sup>18</sup> the six metrically counting syllables of each line occupy a single bar; the supplementary 'e muet' has a second complete bar to itself. In the final version, the effect is less strident: each of the six metrical syllables is set to a quaver, the supplementary 'e muet' is a crotchet. Satie's revisions therefore show him, typically, engaging in a process of rendering his effect with as much economy of means as possible. None the less, that effect remains unmistakable; all the more so because of the accentuation of the lines.

Traditional French prosodic analysis maintains that where a metrical unit corresponds to a sense unit, there is an accent on the unit's final syllable—unless that final syllable is an 'e muet', in which case the accent falls on the syllable preceding the 'e muet'. Composers were expected to set lines of verse with feminine endings accordingly, so that the syllable before the 'e muet' fell on an accented note, and the 'e muet' itself on a relatively unaccented one. For example, in the first line of Satie's 'Elégie' on the death of Debussy (the only song by Satie setting traditional alexandrines, by Lamartine), the shape of the phrase naturally gives the traditionally correct accentuation. The syllable before the final 'e muet', set to a crotchet, is the highest note in the line; the voice then drops an octave to the 'e muet', on a quaver accompanied by the piano's first silence, providing a suitably unstressed ending (see Example 1). Satie

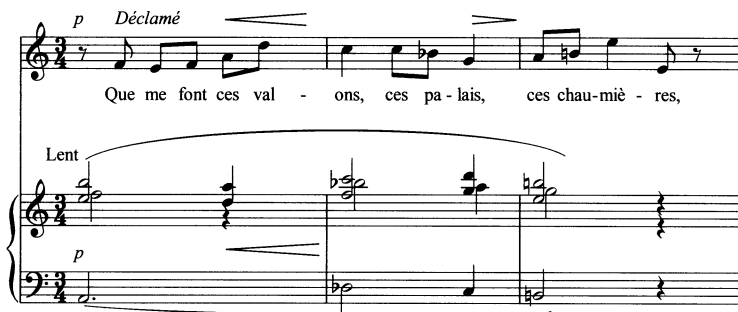
<sup>16</sup> Alain Chevrier demonstrates this in his fascinating analysis of the history of these conventions, *Le Sexe des rimes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1996), pp. 355–63.

<sup>17</sup> 'Ainsi, j'ai pris plusieurs des *Histoires naturelles* de Jules Renard: c'est délicat, c'est rythmé, mais rythmé tout autrement que des vers classiques' (*Lettres, Écrits, Entretiens*, ed. by Arbie Orenstein (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), p. 294). In his respect for 'vers classiques', Ravel follows all the traditional rules for verse setting, with, perhaps, one almost inaudible exception: where an 'e muet' follows a vowel, he does not give it a separate note. Similarly, Satie usually sets this problematic syllable to the same note as the preceding one. However, there is an instructive exception in 'Air du poète', from *Ludions* (first performed in 1923). Here, as in the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, an excessive emphasis on the 'e muet' accompanies a questioning of the status of poetry itself which is far more characteristic of Satie's manner than of Ravel's.

<sup>18</sup> See Orledge, 'Satie's Approach to Composition in his Later Years', pp. 160–61.



is similarly respectful of the rules concerning coincidence between prosodic rhythm and musical rhythm in all his other songs (including the 'caf-conc' songs which he had been writing and publishing in the years before 1914)<sup>19</sup>—except in the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, which patently disobey those rules in every single line.



EXAMPLE 1

In the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, the syllable which should be stressed, the last of the six metrical syllables, always falls on a note which, if one goes by the musical rhythm, should be completely unaccented: the second quaver of the third beat (the songs being in common time). The note on which the following 'e muet' falls is not only longer, it has more of a natural accent, being on a beat, albeit the fourth of the bar. To add prosodic insult to injury, the musical accompaniment insists on this false stress on the 'e muet'; the only written accents in the piano part are on that fourth beat (with instructive exceptions in the third song, to which we shall come later). The result, to an ear used to traditional prosody, can only appear ridiculous. The supernumerary syllable which poets (other than Satie) never intended to be heard at all becomes, in these poems, thanks to Satie's perverse setting, the centre of attention.

There can be no doubt that Satie was keenly aware of these prosodic questions, and indeed of the ridiculous effect produced when musical settings gave undue prominence to an atonic 'e' that ought to bear no stress. He had, indeed, publicly mocked Ambroise Thomas for precisely this:

Pourquoi parler de sa si curieuse prosodie? Philine chante: — 'Je-e suis Titania la blonde'; Laërte nous dit: — 'Belle, ayez pitié de-e nous.' C'est assez.

Mais où donc j'ai laissé mon parapluie?<sup>20</sup>

Satie's prosody is at least as 'curieuse' as Thomas's; indeed, more so, given its date. There is an element of deliberate archaism in Satie's form, at several levels. It looks back to the poets of the second half of the previous century, notably Banville, Baudelaire, and Verlaine, who had broken with two centuries of strict tradition by writing 'isosexual' poems (that is, poems whose rhymes

<sup>19</sup> In fact, these popular songs were the only ones he published before the *Trois poèmes*, with the exception of half a dozen youthful endeavours that his father had published for him in 1887–88. For full details on this as on all Satie publications, the best sources are Ornella Volta's *Erik Satie: bibliographie raisonnée* (Arcueil: Mairie d'Arcueil, 1995), and the 'Chronological catalogue of compositions' in Orledge's *Satie the Composer*, pp. 266–335.

<sup>20</sup> Erik Satie, *Écrits*, ed. by Ornella Volta (Paris: Champ Libre, 1981), p. 17.



were all feminine or all masculine);<sup>21</sup> it also looks over their shoulder, further back, to the poets of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance who had similarly written isosexual poems, before the seventeenth century dictated that masculine and feminine rhymes should alternate in every poem. (In that sense, Orledge's reference to the 'trouvères' is entirely appropriate; and there are more or less authentic archaisms in Satie's language that point in the same direction, most obviously the omission of the subject pronoun in the very first line.) However, by 1914, after twenty-five years of free verse, the experiments of Banville and Verlaine had lost their cutting edge. Why, then, did Satie resuscitate them? A dual answer immediately presents itself when one hears the songs: Satie wanted an absolutely identical prosodic rhythm in every line (which would be possible neither in free verse nor with an alternation of masculine and feminine rhymes); and he wanted to dwell on the anomalously vocalized final 'e muet'.

In short, Satie's verse form seems designed from the outset to collude with a musical setting that brings out a feature which poets in general saw as meaningless, and which musicians including Satie himself, if they knew their trade, normally tried to render inconspicuous. Why? Should we not simply mock it, as Satie mocked Ambroise Thomas? Doubtless a traditional analysis of the craft of word-setting would suggest that we should. But if one places Satie's 'e muet' in the context, not only of the prosodic developments of the previous few decades, but also of the way that words, for Satie, should relate to music, it becomes, not only ridiculous, but also highly expressive.

The *Trois poèmes d'amour* constitute the only work in which Satie set to music words whose authorship he claimed. The words of his 'drame symphonique' *Socrate*<sup>22</sup> are by Plato as translated by Victor Cousin. However, it was Satie who selected (and edited) from the vast Platonic corpus the three short passages which he set, in the three parts of the work. Those three parts have one theme in common: they all represent Socrates, and more particularly the words of Socrates, slipping away, to be replaced by a strange alliance between music and silence. That strange alliance, carefully and repeatedly constructed in *Socrate*, provides a uniquely explicit insight into the relations between words and music in Satie's aesthetics; therefore, I shall allow myself an extended analysis of it, before returning to the *Trois poèmes*.

In the first part, 'Portrait de Socrate', Alcibiades praises Socrates by means of two comparisons, in both of which Socrates is likened to a flute player (Silenus, and Marsyas). Alcibiades then tells us that the effect of Socrates' words on him is like music. He has nothing to say about any Socratic philosophical message; only that 'en l'écoutant, je sens palpiter mon cœur plus fortement que si j'étais agité de la manie dansante des corybantes, ses paroles font couler mes larmes [. . .] Tels sont les prestiges qu'exercent sur moi et sur bien d'autres, la flûte de ce satyre . . .'<sup>23</sup> Already we see the words of Socrates being emptied of

<sup>21</sup> I borrow the term from Chevrier's *Le Sexe des rimes*; see e.g. p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> *Socrate* was first published in Paris by La Sirène in 1919, with piano reduction by Satie himself.

<sup>23</sup> See Satie, *Socrate: drame symphonique en 3 parties avec voix, sur des dialogues de Platon traduits par Victor Cousin* (Paris: Éditions Max Eschig, 1988), pp. 24–25. Cousin's *Œuvres de Platon* were

their properly verbal or philosophical content, and assimilated, in their true effect, to music. The response of Socrates to Alcibiades' praise<sup>24</sup> is simply this: 'Tu viens de faire mon éloge: c'est maintenant à moi de faire celui de mon voisin de droite' (*Socrate*, pp. 26–27). He seems to ignore, or perhaps to refuse, Alcibiades' portrayal of him as an exceptional, admirable individual; his instinct seems to be, rather, modestly to evade the spotlight.

In the second part, Phaëdrus and Socrates go walking down by the river Ilissus, talking vaguely about local nymphs and gods and whether their legends are really true, while heading for a grassy spot where they can lie down quietly. The last words of the second part are these, sung by Socrates:

Le chant des cigales a quelque chose d'animé et qui sent l'été. J'aime surtout cette herbe touffue, qui nous permet de nous étendre et de reposer mollement notre tête sur ce terrain légèrement incliné. Mon cher Phèdre, tu ne pouvais mieux me conduire. (*Socrate*, pp. 64–68)<sup>25</sup>

In short, what Socrates wants to be led to is his rest. And indeed that is what happens in the third part, 'Mort de Socrate', in which Phaëdo recounts the death of Socrates.

'Les cygnes,' says Socrates, 'quand ils sentent qu'ils vont mourir, chantent encore mieux ce jour-là qu'ils n'ont jamais chanté, dans la joie d'aller trouver le dieu qu'ils servent . . .' (*Socrate*, pp. 87–88).<sup>26</sup> Socrates is similarly happy to die, with no thoughts in particular, apparently, other than service to the gods. His last words—'Criton, nous devons un coq à Esculape; n'oublie pas d'acquitter cette dette'—signify, according to Victor Cousin's note, that Socrates wishes to thank the god of healing 'en reconnaissance de sa guérison de la maladie de la vie actuelle'.<sup>27</sup> One could point out the irony that he has to ask the living to carry out this action of thanksgiving for his own death. A good death depends on life. But perhaps it depends on music, too. Socrates had, after all, likened himself to the swan, whose finest song is heard as death approaches. Should we not link this back to the praise of Alcibiades, who saw in Socrates a flute-playing satyr? And the sound which accompanies Socrates to his contented rest in the second part is the 'chant des cigales'. In all three cases (one in each of the three sections of the work), the music evoked is provided by a non-human, or at best semi-human, being, and sets no words; in each case, it takes an intermediary position between words and silence. Music comes between words and silence, indeed, in the very structure of Satie's 'drame symphonique'. Each of the three movements ends with what one might call an instrumental fade-out, a few quiet bars played after the voice becomes silent. At the end of the third

published in twelve volumes from 1822 to 1839; Satie's text here is taken from the *Symposium*, which (under the title *Le Banquet*) is in volume VI (Paris: Didier, 1831), pp. 235–348. Satie adds none of his own words to Cousin's, but he does alter the punctuation, and he omits a great deal: these two sentences are separated by only nineteen words in *Socrate*, but by a whole page in Cousin (see pp. 327–28).

<sup>24</sup> At least, so it seems in Satie's *Socrate*, thanks to Satie's editing of the text; in the Platonic original, several pages separate Alcibiades' words from those of Socrates.

<sup>25</sup> Satie here quotes *Phaëdrus* from volume VI of Cousin's translation (Paris: Pichon et Didier, 1831), p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Taken from volume I of Cousin's translation (Paris: Bossange Frères, 1822), p. 248.

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *Œuvres*, trans. by Cousin, I, 322.

part, this fade-out has the disturbing and disconcertingly powerful effect of a heart stopping. The rhythms in the orchestra have been, throughout the piece, regular and repetitive, in a way that some listeners find monotonous and others hypnotic, always with a pulse around that of a resting heartbeat. When the voice stops after the narration of Socrates' death, all complications and elaborations of rhythm in the orchestra have been stripped away, leaving us with repeated quiet crotchets, marked 'ralentir de plus en plus' (the only such tempo variation in the entire work); they halt with no harmonic resolution. This ending is the only time in the work where the music unambiguously mirrors a narrated event, an event which plays itself out in the well-prepared silencing first of Socrates, then of the singing voice, and finally of the orchestra.

Between words and silence, between the individual and death, music echoes: this is what one might call the aesthetic topography of symbolism (though, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>28</sup> it is by no means confined to symbolism). For Satie, as for Debussy or Mallarmé, this topography is always to be traversed in the same direction: from words, via music, to silence. The art of the poet, therefore, is to produce words that point in the right direction, that point us away from words, through music, towards silence.

Mallarmé, like Satie, was a master of the art of composing words to point away from words; and like Satie, in this composition, he found the rules of French prosody, particularly the prosodically supernumerary 'e muet', to be peculiarly useful tools. *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* contains, as Roger Pearson points out in a brilliant analysis, one single perfect alexandrine: 'l'unique Nombre qui ne peut pas être un autre'.<sup>29</sup> Read as an alexandrine, this phrase naturally has twelve syllables. Perhaps the 'Nombre', then, is the number twelve, since that is the number of points on two dice, and twelve appears to have peculiar numerological significance throughout the work. Or is it thirteen? Should one count the 'e muet' at the end of the line? Perhaps the unique number is in fact the one added to the twelve . . . Such speculation is as inconclusive as it is productive, and contaminates, in the end, one's reading of the whole work, whose very title contains thirteen syllables—but of those thirteen, one is an 'e' almost as vulnerable, from a certain point of view, as a feminine rhyme: 'the thirteen syllables of the title create a pressure to make "Hasard" no longer aspirate'.<sup>30</sup> The kind of pressure that Pearson describes, whose force is undeniable, seems to come from a shadowy sense of form evoked by words yet resistant to resolved meaning; and Satie creates it as effectively as Mallarmé.

The last words in *Socrate* are the phrase: 'du plus sage et du plus juste de tous les hommes' (*Socrate*, pp. 140–41). This has twelve syllables followed by a supernumerary 'e muet'—just like an alexandrine with a feminine rhyme. (One might suspect this of being a coincidence, were it not for the fact that the second part of *Socrate* similarly ends with an alexandrine-length phrase

<sup>28</sup> My aim in *Music Writing Literature, from Sand via Debussy to Derrida* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006) was to show that this topography can already be found fully fledged in the writings of George Sand, and re-emerges almost unaltered, and with full force, in the theory of Barthes and Derrida.

<sup>29</sup> Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 372–73.

<sup>30</sup> Roger Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 273.

of twelve syllables plus 'e muet'.) The sound of that prosodically problematic 'e muet' is thus the last one hears sung. As we have seen, from the point of view of the poets and prosodists of Satie's time, that final sound was not, strictly speaking, the sound of a word at all: it was a sound called for by a purely musical convention. Certainly, it contributes, here, to no denotative meaning (the word 'hommes', the last of the work, would be as easily understood without it). It did, however, have connotations. Its vocalization unmistakably connoted 'art song setting'. It also, as Chevrier shows, connoted the feminine; 'le marquage du féminin dans la forme même'.<sup>31</sup> And in the context of *Socrate*, this is a particularly rich connotation.

The last word of the piece, as we have seen, is 'hommes'. It is sung by Phaedo, who is, in principle, a male character. But all the parts in *Socrate* are for soprano, and to be sung by female singers.<sup>32</sup> This creates a curious gender-bending effect, reinforced by a constant homoerotic undercurrent (of which we shall see an example shortly). It also creates a strange distance between the singing voices and the characters, which is redoubled in the third part of the work. In the whole of that third part, 'Mort de Socrate', which is half the total length of *Socrate*, only Phaedo sings. The words of Socrates, including his self-identification with the dying swan and his own dying words, are recounted by Phaedo. We hear, then, not Socrates, but what Phaedo says Socrates said, according to Plato, through Victor Cousin's translation as edited by Satie. All the participants in this game of textual Chinese whispers are men. But the result is relayed by a woman's voice. In *Socrate*, although all the characters, like the composer, the author of the words, and the translator, are masculine, the feminine is omnipresent; never speaking in its own voice (Satie cut from Cousin's text all the words attributed to Socrates' wife Xanthippe), but rather serving as a material presence, a presence of sound, between the masculine as source of words, and music. That intermediate omnipresence of the feminine is connoted, not only in the feminine endings of the three parts, but in the very name of our hero. 'Socrate', like the name of his gender ('homme'), the god to whom he proposes a sacrifice ('Esculape'), the beast with which he identifies ('cygne'),<sup>33</sup> and the more or less divine beings with which he is himself identified ('Silène', 'satyre'), all end with that sound which connotes a gender that is not his, which bears no denotative meaning, and which is called forth as sound by music alone.

In *Socrate*, it is the interaction of gender roles that brings to life what I have called the symbolist topography. Words, signifying words, come from men. But Socrates knows that his task is to escape words, through music, towards the rest that is silence or death. On the journey, he must lose his speaking voice. If the lesson, the beauty of that escape (which is the only true beauty), is not to be

<sup>31</sup> *Le Sexe des rimes*, p. 142.

<sup>32</sup> "*Socrate*" est écrit pour *soprani*. Je désire qu'en "*public*" il soit donné comme je l'ai écrit. . . . . "avec 4 *soprani*" (letter to Mme Meyer-Bertin dated 16 April 1919, in Erik Satie, *Correspondance presque complète*, ed. by Ornella Volta (Paris: Fayard/IMEC, 2000), p. 361). There is no evidence that he might have had boy trebles in mind; he insisted on female singers for every performance of the work.

<sup>33</sup> The homophone 'cygne/signé', an established topos in readings of Mallarmé, is equally productive here: Satie's signs, one might say, take to singing before they die.

lost, the voice must be respectfully traced in the very process of slipping away; and for that, the voice of another is needed; a modest voice, willing to be a material presence, to survive, without telling us of its own meaning or destiny. In *Socrate*, it is the voice of the feminine that plays this part. In the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, no woman's voice is physically heard; but Satie uses other methods, no less remarkable, to trace the masculine voice slipping away.

The vocal range of the *Trois poèmes*, their rhythmic range, and their dynamic range (the only dynamic marking is an initial 'p') are all modest; and from the very first line, the modest posture of the narrator is set. He is but a grain of sand, he tells us, omitting the first-person pronoun (it appears nowhere in the first song). Modesty is, of course, traditionally a feminine virtue; and in the second and third poems there is an unambiguous inversion of gender roles. It is the male narrator who lacks confidence, who is unsure of his conquest; it is his beloved who is arrogant, and who is associated with cigarette-smoking. All the substantives in these two poems are feminine. The one adjective applied to the narrator himself ('chauve') has a feminine ending. And why 'chauve [. . .] par bienséance'? Perhaps here, again, *Socrate* gives us a clue. The last words Socrates addresses to Phaedo are: 'Demain, ô Phédon [. . .], tu feras couper ces beaux cheveux, n'est-ce pas?' (*Socrate*, pp. 93–94). Hair doubtless symbolizes youthful attractiveness; its loss or removal signifies the loss or removal of that attractiveness. For the narrator of the *Trois poèmes*, any claim to attractiveness would be culpably immodest. He therefore prefers to present himself as 'chauve de naissance'; as hairless as the grain of sand which was his first guise. The slipping away of the masculine voice is figured here not, as in *Socrate*, through its material replacement by a feminine voice, but by a draining away of the image of the virile male, together with its prosodic emblems.

In one of the later drafts of the *Trois poèmes*, Satie added to the poems a number of comments, and a preface. The definitive manuscripts and the published version contain none of these (they were published for the first time, I think, by Nigel Wilkins, in 1975).<sup>34</sup> I will not use them in my textual analysis of the poems; it seems to me that Satie removed them in order to give as much space as possible to the ambiguity and fluidity that result from the very brevity, the apparent repetitiveness, the nudity of the poems, their settings, and their presentation. Some splendidly subtle and complex grammatical instances of that ambiguity are to be found in the third poem; and at the risk of seeming to split hairs, I shall allow myself to analyse two of them at some length.

In the line 'Fume la cigarette', is 'Fume' to be taken as a third-person singular (that is, a statement of fact), or as a second-person imperative? The second-person 'Ta parure', earlier in the poem, seems to invite the latter interpretation; the third-person 'sa conquête', in the next line, invites the former. (The carefully indecisive punctuation, disqualifying neither reading, is to be found in all the manuscript versions.) If one takes cigarette-smoking as a masculine attribute, this leaves open the question: does the narrator's beloved actually have masculine attributes, or is he wishing them on her? A comparable uncertainty

<sup>34</sup> Nigel Wilkins, 'The Writings of Erik Satie: Miscellaneous Fragments', *Music and Letters*, 56 (1975), 288–307 (pp. 293–94).



concerning masculine attributes is created by the following two lines. 'Feraï-je sa conquête, | Que je voudrais complète?' It might seem disconcerting to find our timid narrator evoking the most stereotypically masculine of approaches to relations between the sexes: love as conquest. But it is evoked only to be corroded, in two ways. First: it is a question that receives no answer; and being posed in the same rhythm, in the same register, in the same tone, with the same feminine ending, as every other line so far, it comes across as an expression of uncertainty, more than of sudden unexpected ambition. And second: there is, in fact, another way to resolve the apparent confusion of second and third person which I have noted in these lines. One only has to suppose that 'sa' (in 'sa conquête') means not 'hers', but 'its'—the cigarette's. This is grammatically the most straightforward and consistent reading, and once again, Satie's punctuation (or rather, lack of it), confirmed by the manuscripts, does nothing to discourage it. Certainly, it is semantically bizarre: complete conquest of a cigarette? But as so often with Satie, the bizarre reading born of over-careful analysis actually reinforces something of the initial impression: there is, in the end, no affirmation of conquest; our male narrator's phallic status remains problematic.

A similar corrosion is produced by the very last word of the song: 'luronnette', which, as far as I can tell, is a Satie neologism. Obviously enough, it is to be taken as a diminutive of 'luronne'; and a 'luronne' is, of course, a woman with an approach to love which aligns itself with the stereotypically masculine rather than the stereotypically feminine, being enterprising rather than modest. But the adjective 'douce' undermines that alignment, being rather the opposite of the adjectives such as 'gaie' which traditionally accompany 'luronne'; and so does the diminutive '-ette'—not to mention the preceding line: 'Ta parure est secrète', which itself contains, in one of those extraordinary condensations which are the delight of the 'satiste', all the contradictions of the female stereotype. 'Parure' is, naturally, traditionally a feminine attribute; a man's virtue is in doing, not in seeming. But is it feminine, modest, for the 'parure' to be on show? In making it secret, then, our poet may seem to be rendering it doubly feminine. Yet the absence of a visible feminine 'parure' makes it possible for her to be imagined as a masculinized cigarette-smoking 'luronne' . . .

I have hinted at ways in which the musical setting helps with the process of corrosion. A full analysis of the relation between the words and the piano part would take many pages; again, its apparent simplicity allows for an extraordinary subtlety of effect. I shall limit myself to a few comments on the piano part in the very last bar (see Example 2).

It begins with an accent, which is the only accent on a first beat in the work. Also for the only time in the work, the piano part contains an imitation of the vocal line: for the first six quavers, it reproduces the notes sung in the second bar of the song (also to the words 'Ô douce luronnette'). This adds a new dimension to the repetitiveness which characterizes the *Trois poèmes*. But when we reach the concluding 'e muet', the repetition stops. There is an accent on the fourth beat, with the 'e muet'; there is then, in the piano part, one more note, a final quaver, with a pause over it, whereas, strangely, there is no pause in



EXAMPLE 2

the voice part.<sup>35</sup> This is contradictory, according to the conventions of musical notation; it is impossible to decide whether the piano note should ring on after the voice has stopped. And here, once again, in the subtlest of touches, which, like the over-emphasized 'e muet' or the grammatical ambiguity of 'Fume', we might almost dismiss as a silly mistake, we can, if we are willing to play Satie's game, see the most expressive of subtleties. The words end, with a word that is not a word in the traditional sense ('luronnette' being a neologism), concluded by a sound that is not the sound of a word (the 'e muet'), followed by a single note of music that may or may not outlast that word; and Satie produces this uncertainty through a medium that is normally taken to be transparent: musical notation. His true originality, his unacknowledged genius as a poet, resides, indeed, in the way in which he treats the physical presence of musical notation, as marks on a page, in the same way as he treats words as marks on the page. Other poets, notably Mallarmé and Apollinaire, had used words thus, playing on the relation between physical signs on the page, and the sound and meaning of words; Satie was surely the first to exploit these possibilities in music as well, and at the same time.<sup>36</sup>

One final comment on that final quaver in the piano part: a listener will have been led to expect it, because bars 2, 4, and 6 of the third song all end with

<sup>35</sup> This, again, is certainly not a misprint. One can follow Satie's experiments with pauses through successive drafts; MS 20314 ends in exactly the same way as the printed edition.

<sup>36</sup> The calligrammatic nature of Satie's writing (like that of Picasso in his poems) is far more striking in his manuscripts than in the published texts, and has doubtless been underestimated partly for that reason. For example, in the carefully calligraphed later versions of the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, the length of a note's tail is highly expressive; the tails of notes on an 'e muet' are almost always longer than any other in the bar, and the tail of the very last note in the voice is immense. For practical reasons, Satie was generally not able to have facsimile versions of his manuscripts published except on a small scale, but there is one magnificent exception: his *Sports et divertissements*, where the interaction between words, musical notation, and illustrations creates a work which, as far as I know, remains the only example of its extraordinary genre. (For its publication history, see Whiting, *Satie the Bohemian*, pp. 400–02, where Whiting describes how Ornella Volta untangled its peculiar and often misrepresented trajectory.)



a quaver; so we await the corresponding quaver in bar 8. It duly arrives. But in bars 2, 4, and 6, it was harmonically compatible with the continuing note in the voice; in bar 8, it is not. The moving quavers in the piano part catch the C sharp in the voice part, on its final crotchet; they then move up one tone, and stay there. Certainly, in 1914 there was nothing revolutionary about this unresolved dissonance, just as there was nothing revolutionary about the isosexuality of Satie's verse. But in the manner of its arrival, prepared in many ways by patterns of repetition in the work, and yet in other ways so different from what has happened before, the effect of a stretch, of the final movement up and away from what words can say, at the very limit of what music does, is—I will allow myself to use the word, with its symbolist force—poetic in the extreme.

Did Satie consider himself a poet? There is circumstantial evidence that when writing texts to go with his music, he did. No one called 'le Musicien' or 'le Compositeur' is ever present in those words. But a character called 'le Poète' makes more than one appearance. He is the protagonist in the prefatory material which Satie wrote to go with the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, and did not publish. He reappears the following year, in the texts that accompany the three piano pieces *Avant-dernières pensées*.<sup>37</sup> His presence may be suspected in the first of those pieces, 'Idylle', when we read: 'La lune s'est brouillée avecque ses voisins'; why 'avecque', with the supernumerary archaic 'e muet', except to create a perfect alexandrine?<sup>38</sup> But of course, if poets are versifiers, they are also, like Socrates, musicians; and in the second piece, 'Aubade', the poet appears to be a guitarist attempting to soften by serenade the heart of his beloved:

Ne dormez pas, belle endormie  
 Ecoutez la voix de votre bien-aimé.  
 Il pince un rigaudon.  
 Comme il vous aime!  
 C'est un poète.  
 L'entendez-vous? Il ricane, peut-être?  
 Non:  
 Il vous adore, douce Belle!  
 Il repince un rigaudon et un rhume.  
 Vous ne voulez l'aimer?  
 Pourtant, c'est un poète, un vieux poète!

The music of the poet in 'Aubade' does not get him very far in practical terms. In the third piece, 'Méditation', we again find a poet whose art does not have the desired effect; in fact, it makes him decidedly uncomfortable:

Le Poète est enfermé dans sa vieille tour.  
 Voici le vent.  
 Le Poète médite, sans en avoir l'air.  
 Tout à coup,  
 Il a la chair de poule.  
 Pourquoi?  
 Voici le Diable!

<sup>37</sup> Written in 1915, and published, like the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, by Rouart-Lerolle in 1916.

<sup>38</sup> The rest of the text is in verse (if one can call it verse) as free as that of 'Méditation', which I quote below.

Non, pas Lui: c'est le vent, le vent du génie qui passe  
 Le Poète en a plein la tête, du vent!  
 Il sourit malicieusement, tandis que son cœur pleure comme un saule.  
 Mais le Génie est là! qui le regarde d'un mauvais œil: d'un œil de verre.  
 Et le Poète devient tout humble et tout rouge.  
 Il ne peut plus méditer:  
 Il a une indigestion! une terrible indigestion de mauvais vers blancs et de  
 Désillusions amères!

I have set out the words to these pieces, indeed, as 'vers blancs'. That is not how they appear in the piano music as originally published. They run between the piano staves. The use of capitals (for example, on 'Désillusions') and the gaps between groups of words suggest line divisions; but the line divisions are not physically there. Satie is playing the conventions of musical notation against those of poetic notation. In a poem set to music, one does not, typographically, begin a new line for each verse; whereas in a poem printed as a poem, without music, the new line is the unmistakable marker of verse. Thus it is impossible to say whether Satie's texts constitute lines of poetry, or not. But if one does take them as 'vers blancs'—are they 'mauvais vers blancs', or are they the work of a poet? I would suggest that they are only 'mauvais' in the same way that Satie's setting of the 'e muet' in the *Trois poèmes d'amour* is bad. They never affirm a triumph of poetry; on the contrary, like the *Trois poèmes d'amour*, they suggest a poet singularly lacking confidence both in the possibility of projecting himself through his art, and in the practical usefulness of obeying its rules. That lack of confidence plays itself out in a game of hide and seek with the conventions of poetry and with the expressive powers of language, which gives rise to a provocative questioning of genre and an equally provocative nonsensicality. Satie seems to be mocking us for our attempts to take his poems seriously. 'Il ricane, peut-être?' But their tendency to nonsensicality, their teasing of artistic convention, and the self-effacement of their protagonists are all, in fact, signposts, vectors, indications of the same direction within the symbolist topography, which, if we wish to follow it, requires and rewards special reading skills. Like Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés*, like Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (many of which were indeed written in 1914 and 1915), it cannot be read as a simple linear text; it requires the spacing with which it was published; and Satie adds two further dimensions to the visual effects of Mallarmé or Apollinaire: the dynamics of musical notation, with its own conventions, and the effects of sound called forth from the written word by music. If one considers Satie's verse in the context of its inscription and of its musical intertext, one soon begins to sense that pressure which urges us beyond the conventional use of words (including the poetically conventional), beyond phallocratic control of the voice in the service of expression, effect, or self-assertion, not merely towards the ridiculous, but also towards something that one can only imagine through forms figured as spatial or musical, in which the individual dissolves. It is precisely as it refuses to be simply poetry, anyone's poetry, that Satie's poetry reveals an extraordinarily rich 'parure secrète'.

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